

Marian Caldera interview with Felipe Santiago

Marian CALDERA: Today is June 18, 1984 I am Miriam Caldera
and I am interviewing Felipe Santiago at 117 Cussel Street.

FELIPE SANTIAGO: Okay.

MC: How old are you?

FS: Seventy-five.

MC: What year were you born?

FS: 1908.

MC: Can you tell me about your family?

FS: My mother's name was Mercedes Acevedo Hernández, and my
father's name was Juan Ramón Santiago.

MC: And your childhood? Where did you grow up?

FS: I was born in Lares, Puerto Rico. Lares, Puerto Rico.

MC: What was it like? Was it nice?

FS: Yes, it was very pretty. Very nice.

MC: And what was it like when you moved? [00:01:00]

FS: Well, it was -- even though it was in the country, we
played and lived happily. Even though there wasn't enough
money. But at least the work helped us because we focused
on working. The kids focused on working and obeyed their
parents, did what their parents said. And that helped the
parents and helped everyone, because what you got -- what a

kid got by chance, was for the benefit of the parents. And that was good.

MC: Did you have many siblings?

FS: Well... [00:02:00] Yes, because my father remarried. I was five when he got married again, to a 17-year-old woman, and he was much older, around 50. So there were a lot of kids, a lot of kids from my stepmother.

MC: (inaudible) [00:02:30]

FS: With the other woman, yes.

MC: Did your father work?

FS: Oh yeah, they worked. My father was always working on ranches, he was a [boss?] [00:02:55] of ranches, yes.

MC: Did he get paid well?

FS: Well, in those times it was fine, and [00:03:00] at least it was regular.

MC: Are your parents from Puerto Rico or from here?

FS: From Puerto Rico.

MC: Are their parents from Spain?

FS: No. Well, they might have some link, but they are Puerto Rican.

MC: Did you finish all of your schooling up to graduation?

FS: No, just to fifth grade.

MC: Why?

FS: Because I couldn't -- I couldn't study. I needed to work.
I stopped studying after fifth grade.

MC: You didn't finish high school?

FS: No, no.

MC: And college?

FS: Nothing.

MC: And you moved here?

FS: Well, yes. I kept living after, when my stepmother, she wasn't my mother... [00:04:00] Well, I left home, and moved to another town. And I kept working in another place and I went home and, you know. I came and went.

MC: How long did you live here?

FS: No, no. I came here when I was already older. I've been here for 20 years.

MC: Did you look for work?

FS: Yes, I looked for work. I was already used to working, to living from work, you know? Living from work, not living from anything else, but my work. So, I came here and I looked for work in the nurseries. You know what nurseries are? Planting little sticks and those things. In the nurseries, in the farms. *Farm.*

MC: And how did you get here? On a boat?

FS: No, I got sent here. [00:05:00] My son's wife sent for me, she sent me money so I could come. So I left my family, left my wife, I came here and I worked.

MC: Did you go back for your wife?

FS: I came and went, then I went. I brought money, and I bought a farm, I had six [ropes?] of land there. Every time I went, I worked on things and I planted and lived there. Finally, I sold it and came here.

MC: You sold everything?

FS: Yes, I sold everything and I came here, you know because I thought that here I could have a good life, so I sold my farm and I came. But I always filled my time with working, thank God, since I started working [00:06:00] on the farm. Then I worked at a restaurant here in New England, in Fairfield -- in Westport. A restaurant, a big hotel, and I was working there and then I went back to Puerto Rico. And then we were going to have the kid who just turned 18. You know, she was about to give birth and I had to go because she was going to give birth, and I went and waited for six months with no [offer?] and then I came here with them. With the family.

MC: You came with your family? Did you look for an apartment?

FS: Yes, I looked for an apartment and I started working in a factory, a carpentry factory, because I knew a little about

carpentry, about wood and those things. [00:07:00] I started to work and I worked 10 years in that factory.

MC: Did it pay well?

FS: Well, I started at a low wage but then I got raises.

MC: And what were your neighborhoods like? Did you live well?

FS: Yeah, we lived a little more -- not like today, we didn't have to be afraid like we do today, not so much. These days, people scare themselves sick about their children, you know? The people didn't use to live happily, no. I've always been in the church, I found the way. When I was -- in 1940, since then I've been a Christian. I don't separate myself from the lord anymore. That has helped me a lot, even though my children don't go to church, [00:08:00] but me and my wife always go to church.

MC: What was the church like?

FS: The church is Pentecostal, it's good.

MC: Are there a lot of Puerto Ricans?

FS: Yes, many. And the church today has a large membership, the Good Shepherd Church. Here on 725 Hancock Avenue, Reverend Castillo.

MC: Were you with this church when it started?

FS: Yes, I was here. They bought a church that belonged to some Jews, so I came to -- I went to a church here in Burr

Creek that they had, but then they bought the church -- the temple.

MC: And what did your family do? Did they go out a lot? To the park?

FS: Well, yes, we went to the parks and we could live like that, because [00:09:00] when I came here to State Street, which today is very bad, it wasn't like that. You could walk at any time of night without danger. Not anymore, not anymore. That's why I moved from Lee Avenue to here. I had a house and I sold it and I moved here, because of the terrible issue of -- not that I was scared but that, my wife was getting sick, and having mobility problems, like walking to church at night. And I don't have a car.

MC: Were you here during the Depression? The Depression?

FS: What depression?

MC: *Depression.*

FS: The economy?

MC: Of the economy.

FS: Yeah, I came [00:10:00] here when there was that with the economy, yeah, yeah. When it wasn't so easy to get things.

MC: What did you do then? Work?

FS: Working, working.

MC: It didn't affect you that much?

FS: No, it didn't affect me because, I always worked and I didn't need to be thinking about other things to live, just my work. So, people see the way you live and they help you.

MC: So it didn't affect you that much?

FS: No, no, it didn't affect me.

MC: And the World War? The first World War?

FS: No, no. I came here after that.

MC: And how do you know about it?

FS: No. I have two brothers in Puerto Rico [00:11:00] who were in that war.

MC: Yeah?

FS: Yeah, now they're really old.

MC: Older brothers?

FS: Yeah, older than me, and they were old for the army. Thirty-something years old. One of them got to be a lieutenant in the Army.

MC: And the thing with Martin Luther King?

FS: With Martin Luther? Yeah, I think I was here when that --

MC: It didn't happen here?

FS: No.

MC: And did your wife work?

FS: Yeah, my wife has always worked.

MC: Did she make a lot of money?

FS: Well, in those days she didn't make that much because she doesn't know English, and she started working in factories that don't pay well. And she still works. She's 62, [00:12:00] she'll turn 62 in June. She's still working. She's going to retire because she has a leg problem. And I'm working.

MC: Still?

FS: Still. I work at the nutrition program, in the Baptist Church. Down there with the old people.

MC: The Vietnam war no?

FS: No, I heard about that war but no.

MC: And when Martin Luther King was killed?

FS: I think so, yes. I was here.

MC: And how did it affect you?

FS: Oh, surely, because it affected me in the sense that, someone who is working for humanity and wants good things, [00:13:00] taking their life, that affects you.

MC: And what kind of people were in your neighborhood?
Americans? [00:13:13]

FS: Where, here?

MC: When you first got here.

FS: Oh yeah. When I first got here there were a lot of Puerto Ricans. Lots of Puerto Ricans already, yeah.

MC: And did they treat you well? Because they say when the Puerto Ricans came...

FS: Well, the thing is, I didn't make friends with people that weren't going to help me. You know? That aren't going to help me because they weren't good, so I looked for people who would help me, and people who were worthwhile. I didn't hang out with people who... [00:14:00] After 1940, when I was born again, I haven't had a drink, or a smoke, or anything. So, I don't go to bars or anything. I worked, for my home, and the church, and that was what belonged to me.

MC: And is it still good here?

FS: Quite good. When you're young, you don't know a lot, look at the things there are outside. The things, I mean the -- we see this thing that appears good, that looks like happiness, but what is going on is that liberty is covered up by debauchery. You know what that means? Liberty for debauchery? Well, liberty for debauchery means that God gives you a beautiful day, right? Or not to you, because you're a girl. But suppose, [00:15:00] He gives humanity a beautiful day, brilliant to lie under a tree or on the beach, you know? To take your family out, instead of doing that, they fill the car with gasoline, they go to pray, to drink, to enjoy the day, to enjoy that day. And on that

day that they want to enjoy, what they do is lose their lives, or lose the car, or they go to jail, because they exchanged liberty for debauchery. That's what liberty for debauchery means. You understand? Instead of enjoying the day and returning to their homes happy, it's the opposite, they return sick, or they go to the hospital, or they go from one place to another, or someone else comes and beats them up, because they hang out with people who don't help them. That's what [00:16:00] liberty for debauchery is.

MC: And when you came, were you working?

FS: Oh yeah, I worked and worked. I first went to work on a farm in Brookfield, far away. Then I went to that hotel in New England, in Westport, then I went back home and when I came back from Puerto Rico I went to work at the factory for [Denny?] [00:16:29] and [Mister Freddy?] [00:16:32] like I said, and then I retired.

MC: Do you miss Puerto Rico?

FS: I went back to Puerto Rico a few times, I went back. I went back to Puerto Rico.

MC: Did you stay for a long time?

FS: Yes, but I came back here.

MC: And how's the church?

FS: Oh, the church I go to is called the -- The Good Shepherd Church. The Good Shepherd. [00:17:00]. Yes, Reverend Castillo.

MC: And what's your opinion of (inaudible) [00:17:17]?

FS: Well, now my opinion is that I believe that I will stay here until God decides it's time.

MC: You're not going to Puerto Rico?

FS: No, because going to Puerto Rico now, Puerto Rico is worse than here. So, you need a lot of money. You need to have good access to go to Puerto Rico. It's not like before. Puerto Rico's not like before.

MC: You haven't gone to Puerto Rico?

FS: Yeah, I've gone, but it's very different, even though before you lived in the country and it seemed very stifling. [00:18:00] It wasn't like that. Because you lived -- you didn't need to be paying attention that something could happen, something with your family or something like that. Because everything was calm, and my dad came and went from the house and it wasn't like it is now. Now, if your son goes out, you can't sleep, worrying about him.

MC: So your children went to school?

FS: Yes, my children went to school, although the oldest didn't go to school here, but he learned English well here. And he has a good job as a carpenter.

MC: Your daughter?

FS: My oldest son, Abraham. So, another daughter works too and [00:19:00] another daughter got married, she has a good husband, they both work, the other son works in a cabinet factory, both of them, Abraham and him. And the youngest, from when we came back here when he was six months old, well, he's not working now.

MC: And how were the schools back then? Good?

FS: The schools back then were good, because you needed to be respectful, you needed to respect the teacher, and they taught well, they indoctrinated you about God. Now what they teach is very different. You know?

MC: It was stricter.

FS: Yeah, you needed to respect, and they taught you to respect [00:20:00] your father. And you respected your teacher, and the teacher, when he punished someone, it was for a good reason, you know. It was very different.

MC: And, the school from back then? What school was it?

FS: Well, it was in Puerto Rico, and they taught English, but you didn't learn perfect English like here.

MC: Here?

FS: No, no. There. The kids, no. The kids studied here.

MC: What school?

FS: Basic.

MC: Basic?

FS: Basic, yes. Did you go? And the... (inaudible)

[00:20:43]

MC: (inaudible) [00:20:44]

FS: (inaudible) [00:20:45]

MC: Did they teach you well?

FS: Yes. Maybe you know Wilda, Wilda, (inaudible)? [00:20:54]

Or Rubén, no? Or Junior, Felipe? No?

MC: What? [00:21:00] Do they go there?

FS: No, not anymore. They already left, but they got that school. Then I moved him here, he went to Central High School. But he dropped out too.

MC: And you lived on Western when you got here?

FS: Oh, no. I lived on Clinton Avenue. Then on Wordin Avenue.

Then on Lee Avenue, I bought a house and then I sold it.

MC: And many Puerto Ricans arrived at that time?

FS: Oh yeah, lots. They were always coming. Lots of Puerto Ricans.

MC: With their families?

FS: Yeah.

MC: Looking for work?

FS: Well, it's [00:22:00] a sad situation, what I'm telling you. Sometimes young people come from there, right? And the young person comes as a good, decent person, when they get here, you know? But once they get here, they start to make friends, and these friends has already learned bad things, and is lost in the street. So they make friends, and the kid who just came from Puerto Rico, who, who is good, has no vices, doesn't do what the others do. So, they -- they say "You don't do anything, you don't do anything, why don't you do this?" So, they lose too. Instead of getting a good job or trying to live happily, they learn to hurt their lives. These days, they come from there and they hurt their lives. They should stay there, because that's the situation.

MC: Did a lot go back?

FS: A lot went back.

MC: But not you? [00:23:00]

FS: No. But when they go back, they take the sickness with them from here. The sickness, do you know what I mean? The vice. When they go back to Puerto Rico Puerto Rico gets worse, because they bring back the vices from here. They bring them back there, they plant the bad seeds there. Back there in Puerto Rico. These people leave here with

vices, and they bring them there, and they hurt the place they return to.

MC: And when you got here did you work?

FS: Yes, I worked. In my life, I have always worked. Work.

MC: Did you make good money for your family?

FS: Yes, I made pretty good money.

MC: Do you like it here?

FS: Yes, I like it here. My life has been dedicated to working, and now I am 75 years old, and I am working. A part-time job and I am working, and I am doing well.

[00:24:00] I take care of myself.

MC: And how old are you?

FS: Seventy-five. Soon I'll be 76, in September I'll be 76.

MC: Do you live alone?

FS: No, I have my wife here, and a boy. He's not mine, he's my oldest son's. I've lived here for a year and a few months.

MC: I think I'm done.

FS: Okay.

END OF AUDIO FILE